

THE CONQUEST OF FEAR

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The following is a sermon by the late Baptist Pastor George W. Truett:

Revelation 1:17, 18 -- "And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death."

In this hour of worship, let us think together on Jesus' greatest saying concerning the conquest of fear. It is given in these words in the first chapter of the last book of the New Testament. "Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death."

It is both the mission and the message of Jesus to deliver mankind from servile, enervating, down-dragging fear. And certainly the problem of fear is a problem to be reckoned with in many lives. One of the most outstanding and surprising disclosures of our stressful, nervous, modern civilization, is the fact that many people are in the thrall of fear. This fact obtains with all classes of people--the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the educated and ignorant, the old and the young, with all ages and classes. They have fears of all kinds--fear of themselves, of others, of the past, present and future, of sickness, of death, of poverty, and on and on.

A little while ago, it was my privilege to preach twice daily for a week to one of our most influential American colleges. Its student body is large, and widely influential, and more mature in years than is the student body of most of our colleges. Before my arrival there, the president of the college sent a questionnaire to every student, asking that the students indicate any subjects upon which they would have the visiting minister speak. When the answers were tabulated, the president and faculty of the college, together with the visiting minister and others, were amazed by the fact that the majority of that large and mature student body had made this request: "Let the visiting minister tell us how we may conquer fear."

The Bible is the one book which answers that very question. There are two words which stand out in the Bible, like mountain peaks--the words, Fear not! With those words, God comforted Abraham: "Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield and exceeding great reward." With those same words he comforted Isaac at his lonely task of digging wells in the wilderness. With the same words he comforted Jacob, when his little Joseph was lost

somewhere down in Egypt. So comforted he the Israelites at the Red Sea: "And Moses said unto the people, fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will show to you today." These two words, Fear not! standing out here and there in the Bible, are a part of our great inheritance as Christians. We shall do well to note them very carefully, wherever they occur in the Bible, and to note their contextual relations.

The three supreme matters which concern mankind are life, death and eternity. Jesus here gives us an all-comprehensive statement concerning these three vast matters. He bids us to be unafraid of life, of death, and of eternity. It is Jesus' greatest saying concerning the conquest of fear. It was spoken to John, who was banished to Patmos, because of his fealty to Christ. Let us now earnestly summon ourselves to think on this vast message of Jesus.

I. AND, FIRST, JESUS BIDS US TO BE UNAFRAID OF LIFE.

He reminds us that he is "the first and the last; I am he that liveth." Is the fear of life real? It is poignantly so with many. The liability of fear is constant, and this fact is perhaps the explanation for many a suicide. I asked one who sought in a despondent hour to snuff out the candle of life, and was prevented from so doing: "Why did you wish to end your life?" And the pathetic answer was given: "I was afraid to go on with life." People are afraid, for one thing, because they are so dependent. They are utterly dependent upon God, and greatly dependent upon one another. Sometimes the proud expression is heard: "I am independent." Let such a one tell us of whom he is independent, and how and where and when? We are all bound together in the bundle of life. "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself."

Again, we are afraid, because we are continually in the presence of great mysteries, such as the mystery of sin, of sorrow, of God, of one's own personality, and of the strange and oftentimes trying providences that come to us in the earthly life.

Still again, the responsibilities of life are such that serious men and women must often tremble. Piercing questions arise to probe our hearts to the depths. Often do we ask: "Will I make good in the stern battle of life?" "Will I disappoint the expectations of my loved ones and friends,?" Even Moses trembled before his mighty responsibilities, thus voicing his fear: "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." And even Solomon shrank before his vast responsibility, saying: "And now, O Lord my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father; and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in." Often come the testing hours in life, when we cry out with Paul: "Who is sufficient for these things!" Many times are we provoked to ask that very question, as we are called upon to make important decisions and meet the critically testing experiences of life. Verily, we are many times made to tremble before the

immeasurably responsible facts of life. Jesus graciously comes to us, saying: "Do not be afraid of life." "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee."

II. AGAIN, HE BIDS US BE UNAFRAID OF DEATH.

He reminds us, "I . . . was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore." The shuddering fear of death is a very real fact in many a life. Some are in bondage all their earthly life time, through fear of death. Maeterlinck confesses in his autobiography: "I am a frightened child in the presence of death." It is not to be wondered at that the thought of death casts its oppressive shadows about us, because death is an experience utterly strange to every one of us. "It is a sojourn whence no traveler returns." "The black camel kneels at every gate." "With equal pace, impartial fate knocks at the palace and the cottage gate."

It is not surprising that numbers of people have a strange fascination for prying into the secrets of death. This gruesome curiosity sometimes leads its possessor into strange quests and still stranger claims. What shall be said of these uncanny efforts to pry into the secrets of the dead? Such efforts are both profitless and presumptuous. Jesus has told us all that we need to know about death. He knows all about the grave, for he has explored its every chamber, and he has met this Waterloo of death and won. He is not now in the grave. He is alive, he is the Living One who is now bringing to bear the resources of his wisdom, mercy, power and love upon our needy world, and his will is bound to prevail. We are told that "Ideas rule the world." Very well, compare the ideas proclaimed by Jesus, with all others, and at once we see how preeminent his ideas are. The hands on his clock never turn backward. "For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet." Some day, thank God! War will be under his feet forever. And so will be all forms of intemperance, and selfishness, and sin. And so will be death itself, because it is divinely decreed that "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ...But thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

And still further--Jesus is with his people when they come to die. The evidences of this fact are countless and glorious. Often and joyfully did John Wesley declare: "Our people die well." Many of us, even in our limited and very humble sphere, can give the same glad testimony. "Our people die well." Indeed, when we see how well they can die, how unafraid and triumphant they are, when they face the last enemy, we are fortified afresh for our work of testifying to the sufficiency of Christ's help, in every possible human experience.

Not long ago, I saw a timid mother die. Hers was a very humble home, the husband was a carpenter, the children were very modestly clothed, and the limitations imposed by a meager income for the home were markedly in evidence. With a calmness, fearlessness and joyfulness indescribable, that modest woman faced the final chapter of the earthly

journey. She gave her sublime Christian testimony to her sorrowing husband and children; she confidently bound them to the heart of God, in a prayer that can never be forgotten by those who heard it; and then she passed into the valley of the shadows, smilingly whispering the victorious words: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

The next day, I saw a strong husband and father pass to the great beyond. He requested that the pastor pray that the whole household might unreservedly accept God's will. When the prayer was concluded, the strong man who was rapidly hurrying down to death sublimely said to the poignantly sorrowing wife and sons: "This is God's way; he doeth all things well; I accept his will without a question; tell me, O my dear wife and children, will you not likewise accept his will in this hour, and through all the unfolding future?" And with one voice, they said: "We will." And then, the strong man was gone, and the peace and calm of heaven filled all that house.

A third day came, and I was called to witness the passing of an unusually timid girl in the Sunday school. The modest child of little more than a dozen years of age anxiously said to her mother: "Everything is getting dark, Mamma, come close to me, I'm afraid." And the gentle mother said to the little daughter: "Jesus is with us in the dark, my child, as well as in the light, and he will surely take care of all who put their trust in him." And the child's face was immediately lighted up with a joyful smile, as she said: "I am trusting him, and I'll just keep on trusting him, and he will stay close to me, for he said he would, and he always does what he says he will do." And a little later, even in life's closing moments, her voice could be heard singing: "There'll be no dark valley when Jesus comes, to gather his children home."

Such illustrations of triumph in the hour of death could be indefinitely multiplied. The pastors of your churches are privileged to witness such triumphs, week by week, and they are able, therefore, to stand in their pulpits, and victoriously shout with Paul: "But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

III. NOT ONLY DOES JESUS BID US BE UNAFRAID OF LIFE AND OF DEATH, BUT HE ALSO BIDS US TO BE UNAFRAID OF ETERNITY.

The word he speaks here in his great promise is: "I . . . have the keys of hell and of death." That little word "keys" carries with it a large meaning. It means guidance, it means authority, it means control. Just as Jesus cares for his people in life and in death, even so will he care for them in eternity. "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

Belief in God and in immortality go together. The age-old question: "If a man die, shall he live again?" is a question that will not be hushed. It is no wonder that such a question has been eagerly asked by myriads, in the recent years. The Great War laid millions of young men under sod and sea, and has sent other millions to stagger on with broken health, even down to the grave. Suffering hearts all around the encircling globe have asked and are continually asking if death is an eternal sleep, and if the grave ends all. To such questions we must give our most positive answer. The grave does not end all. The doctrine of immortality is not a dead creed, an empty speculation, an intellectual curiosity, an interesting question. The doctrine of immortality is a fact, a force, a great moral dynamic, which lifts life to high levels, and drives it to great ends. Yes, we are to live again, beyond the sunset and the night, to live on consciously, personally, and forever.

The nature of man demands immortality. The instinct of immortality is the prophecy of its fulfillment.

Where in all nature can you find instinct falsified,
The wings of the bird mean that it was made to fly.
The fins of the fish mean that it was made to swim.
The deathless yearnings of the heart imperiously cry out for immortality.

On the modest monument that marks the last resting place in France of President Roosevelt's son, who fell in the Great War, is inscribed this death-defying sentence: "He has outsoared the shadows of our night." The human heart refuses to be hushed in its cry for immortality.

The character of God presages immortality. When Job thought of men, he said: "If a man die, shall he live again?" When he thought of God, he said: "I know that my Redeemer liveth." Then Job went on to voice the deathless cry of the heart for immortality. God is infinitely interested in us, he cares for us, he provides for us. If he cares for the birds, as he does, surely he cares also for us. He bids us to put fear away, reminding us: "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered." "Fear ye not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." Abraham was "the friend of God." Death has not dissolved that friendship. "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him."

A little girl, who heard a preacher's sermon, on this sentence, gave this report of the sermon to a little neighbor girl who did not hear the sermon: "The preacher said that Enoch took a long walk with God; and they walked, and they walked, and they walked; and at last, God told Enoch that he need not go back to live at his house any more, but he could just go on home with God, to live with him, in his house, forever." Surely, the little girl's interpretation is what our hearts demand, and it is what we steadfastly and joyfully believe to be the plan of God for his friends.

But the crowning argument: for immortality is the experience of Jesus. He has incontestably proved it. He came to earth, and really lived, and died, and was buried, and rose again, just as he said he would do. Long years ago, the men of the Old World wondered if there was some other land, beyond the waters, to the far West. One day, a bolder spirit than others had been, set sail toward the West. And by and by, Columbus set his feet upon the shores of a new land. Even so, Jesus was the divine Columbus who has explored all the chambers of the grave, and has come back therefrom, the victorious Conqueror of death. He comforts his friends with the gracious words: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." In that incomparable chapter of guidance and comfort, the fourteenth chapter of John, Jesus would anchor us, once for all, with his divinely assuring words: "Because I live, ye shall live also."

Low in the grave He lay--Jesus my Saviour!
Waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord!
Up from the grave, He arose, With a mighty triumph o'er His foes;
He arose a Victor from the dark domain,
And He lives forever, with His saints to reign,
He arose! He arose!!
Hallelujah! Christ arose!!

With our faith in that victorious Saviour, we may sing with Whittier, in his exquisite poem, "Snowbound."

Alas for him who never sees
The stars shine through his cypress-trees!
Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,
Nor looks to see the breaking day,
Across the mournful marbles play!
Who hath not learned; in hours of faith,
The truth to flesh and sense unknown,
That Life is ever lord of Death,
And Love can never lose its own!

Are you trusting in Christ as your personal Saviour, and do you gladly bow to him as your rightful Master? If your hearts answer, "Yes," go your many scattered ways, I pray you, without hesitation or fear. Your personal relations to Christ will determine your relations to the three vast matters: life, death and eternity, concerning which he would have us put all our fears away, now and forever more.

He is our Pilot, our Righteousness, our Saviour, our Advocate, our promised and infallible Guide, even unto death, and throughout the vast beyond, forever. Well do we

often sing: "He leadeth me." As we sing it now, who wishes openly to confess him and follow him?

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